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The W Transboundary Park: A Model of Subregional Integration in Africa

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Abstract

This study examines the management and promotion strategies of the W Transboundary Park in West Africa, with a focus on their role in fostering subregional integration. It aims to assess how environmental conservation efforts contribute to sustainable development and territorial cohesion in the region. A qualitative research approach was employed, combining field observations, semi-structured interviews, and analysis of official documents and meeting minutes involving both public and private stakeholders. Findings reveal that the W Park is effectively managed through a tripartite governance framework involving Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which facilitates continuous dialogue, shared decision-making, and cross-border cooperation. The strategies implemented have positively impacted both biodiversity conservation and local socio-economic development, particularly through ecotourism and community engagement. These results underscore the importance of integrated and participatory management in promoting regional stability and cohesion. The study's primary contribution lies in demonstrating how transboundary natural resource management can serve as a practical tool for regional integration and sustainable development, providing a model that is replicable in other transboundary conservation areas across Africa and beyond.

Keywords: W Transboundary Park; subregional integration; ecotourism; transboundary cooperation; sustainable development

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Introduction

Africa stands as a vast reservoir of biodiversity, hosting nearly one-third of the world's terrestrial species (Bezeng et al., 2025). Within this context, West Africa is particularly remarkable for its climatic diversity, which endows the region with significant potential for tourism. Nevertheless, its share of global tourism remains marginal. In 2023, the African continent recovered approximately 90% of its pre-COVID-19 international visitor numbers and 95% of its tourism revenue, reaching around 66.4 million international arrivals—representing only 4% of the global total. The revenue generated by international tourism was estimated at USD 3.3 trillion (UN Tourism, 2025). One of the major obstacles to tourism development in Africa is the persistent negative perception portrayed by international media. Coverage frequently emphasizes issues such as poverty, conflict, and health crises, which fosters a distorted image of the continent as an unsafe or unattractive destination for tourists (Avraham & Ketter, 2017; Fauzel & Tandrayen-Ragoobur, 2022). Despite these challenges, many African countries are implementing policy reforms, economic development initiatives, and capacity-building programs in the tourism sector, paving the way for a promising future for the regional industry (Kimbu & Tichaawa, 2018). According to Gowreesunkar (2019), Africa could consolidate its position as a world-class tourism destination if the aspirations of Agenda 2063 are effectively promoted and operationalized. In this context—where tourism has become an undeniable economic driver—many African nations have recognized the need to join forces through the creation of subregional institutions and common economic spaces to face increasing global competition (Trejos, 2012). Initiatives such as the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are among the most active frameworks in the region. Through these alliances, West African countries have established a shared geopolitical space and adopted unified positions in global affairs. Furthermore, several protected natural areas transcend national borders, serving as emblematic examples of regional cooperation. One such case is the W Transboundary Park, one of the last great nature reserves on the continent. The objective of this article is to analyse the management and promotion strategies implemented in the W Transboundary Park and to evaluate their contribution to subregional integration in West Africa. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study examines the tripartite collaboration between Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger, highlighting how this partnership strengthens biodiversity conservation and promotes sustainable development in the region.

Literature review

Subregional integration

Subregional integration is defined as an initiative through which several countries seek to unify their political and economic visions within a specific geographic space to promote joint actions that foster economic development, physical cooperation, and institutional regulation (Kebalo et al., 2022). This process involves the establishment of regulatory and institutional frameworks that encourage interdependence among nations, thereby consolidating closer relations and strengthening their economies. Integration leads to the intensification of economic relations and materializes at various levels, such as free trade zones, customs unions, common markets, and, ultimately, economic and monetary unions—each representing a higher degree

of cooperation and regulatory harmonization (González, 2020). In Africa, subregional integration traces its origins to the wave of independence movements in the 1960s and the establishment of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, which institutionalized Pan-Africanism (Bach, 1983). This movement sought to achieve the full political liberation of the continent and lay the foundations for socioeconomic development. However, the Pan-African ideal of unity—embodied in the notion of the *United States of Africa*—clashed with a regionalist approach that divided the continent into five major subregions (González, 2020). This tension reflected both shared aspirations for autonomy and external influences arising from the Cold War (1947–1989), which polarized African nations into moderate and progressive ideological blocs. The former aligned with Western Europe and the United States, while the latter-maintained ties with Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Communist China. Within this context, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) emerged as the pillars of African integration. Organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the East African Community (EAC), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) have worked to consolidate political, economic, and social cooperation (Chico, 2018). These institutions aim to reduce trade barriers, promote mobility, and develop common strategies in key sectors such as tourism, widely recognized as an engine of sustainable development.

In West Africa, ECOWAS (1975) and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU, 1994) have played a leading role in advancing convergence toward a common market. Both organizations share the objective of eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers while fostering regulatory cooperation (UNCTAD, 2018). They have also established specialized commissions—such as those dedicated to tourism—where strategies are designed to harmonize regulations and coordinate the promotion of the sector across the region (Diop & Fall, 2011; Salisu & Ademuyiwa, 2013). These initiatives highlight the potential of subregional integration as a mechanism to address common challenges and strengthen West Africa's position on the global stage (Nkala & Monyae, 2024). Nonetheless, persistent obstacles remain. Much of the region's limited progress has been attributed to the lack of harmonization between national and regional priorities, the prevalence of narrow nationalisms, and the enduring tensions between continental and subregional commitments. These factors have hindered effective cooperation and limited the transformative potential of integration processes (Khadiagala, 2024).

Competitiveness through natural resources and the environment

Subregional integration has the potential not only to enhance economic competitiveness (Guannu, 2024) but also to improve the management of natural resources and the environment (Egbe, 2023). This framework enables countries to collaborate on the conservation and sustainable use of shared ecosystems—such as watersheds, transboundary forests, and biodiversity reserves. By coordinating their efforts, countries can preserve these ecosystems while maximizing their strategic value for international markets, thereby reinforcing both environmental sustainability and economic resilience. Such an approach supports the achievement of global objectives, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and ensures the long-term viability of ecosystems that sustain local economies (Ogwu et al., 2023). A key advantage of subregional integration lies in the creation of economies of scale through the coordination of infrastructure and policies related to strategic resources such as renewable energy, water, and minerals. This cooperation reduces operational costs, improves efficiency, and increases competitiveness (Naeher & Narayanan, 2020). The environmental dimension of integration also fosters technological and scientific innovation. Collaboration on transnational research projects can accelerate the development of advanced solutions for resource management—such as intelligent environmental monitoring systems, water reuse technologies, and climate-change adaptation strategies (England et al., 2018). These innovations enhance the technical capacities of participating regions and position them as leaders in sustainability. Sectors such as agribusiness and tourism exemplify how subregional integration can generate added value. In tourism, initiatives such as the development of ecotourism routes, bird-watching circuits, and cross-border cultural itineraries capitalize on shared natural and cultural heritage to position regions as distinctive destinations in the global market (Dittmann & Müller-Mahn, 2023). These initiatives encourage cooperation among countries and strengthen visibility and competitiveness.

Subregional coordination also facilitates the harmonization of norms and standards, making cross-border tourism experiences more accessible while promoting investment in infrastructure, including transport networks, visitor information centers, and unified signage systems. These improvements not only enhance the quality of tourism offerings but also integrate local communities into tourism value chains, promoting inclusive development. For these reasons, Transboundary Protected Areas (TBPAs)—which span more than one country—play an essential role in biodiversity conservation through international cooperation. Such areas ensure the protection of ecosystems beyond national borders and often enjoy international recognition as World Heritage Sites, Ramsar Wetlands, or UNESCO Biosphere Reserves. Globally, it is estimated that there are over 200 TBPAs, often referred to as *peace parks* (Ali, 2007; Duffy, 2001), as they represent the intersection between land politics and border politics (Ramutsindela, 2017). Most are concentrated in Africa and the Americas, where shared biodiversity and the need to protect migratory species encourage international cooperation (Swatuk, 2021). These regions benefit from bilateral and multilateral agreements that facilitate the joint management of natural resources. Table 1 presents some of the most representative TBPAs in West Africa. In contrast, in Asia, geopolitical tensions and territorial disputes have limited the expansion of this model, whereas in Europe, the Natura 2000 Network has facilitated the creation of TBPAs through economic and legal collaboration among member states.

Table 1: West African TBPA

ALSO	Countries	Extension	Characteristics
W-Arly-Pendjari Cross-Border Park	Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger	32,250	It is home to rich biodiversity, species (elephants, lions and cheetahs). UNESCO World Heritage Site.
Niokolo-Koba-Badiar Protected Area Complex	Senegal and Guinea	9,130	Endangered species (western chimpanzee and forest elephant).
Gambia-Niokolo Koba National Park	Gambia and Senegal	4,000	River and terrestrial ecosystems, species (hippos and waterfowl).
Bafing-Falémé Cross-Border Reserve	Mali and Senegal	8,500	Ecological corridors, species (western chimpanzee and other primates).
Comoé-Leraba National Park	Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso	11,500	From savannas to riparian forests, species (African elephant and buffalo).

Methods

This research adopted a qualitative approach, combining field data collection and desk-based analysis. This design enabled an in-depth understanding of the management and promotion strategies of the W Transboundary Park and their contribution to subregional integration. Primary data were gathered through field observations, semi-structured interviews with key actors and local communities, and the analysis of minutes and resolutions from periodic meetings involving public and private organizations. Fieldwork was conducted within the W Park and its surrounding areas, specifically in the Banikoara region of Benin, during March and June 2024. The observation process involved *in situ* analysis of conservation activities, interactions with local communities, and assessment of existing infrastructures. These direct observations provided contextual insights into the functioning of the Park and the socio-environmental dynamics of its periphery. A significant portion of the information regarding the components of the W Park was obtained through direct collaboration with the following institutions:

- Ministère du Tourisme, de la Culture et des Arts (Benin)
- Ministère de la Culture, des Arts et du Tourisme (Burkina Faso)
- Ministère des Transports, du Tourisme et de l'Artisanat (Niger)

In this context, nine interviews were conducted with public officials and park managers during tripartite meetings and summits organized by the WAEMU Tourism Commission. These interviews targeted individuals responsible for national tourism programs and representatives of the W Park in each country, identified as the main interlocutors. Their collaboration facilitated access to specific information on national strategies and joint initiatives implemented across borders. The perspective of local communities was also incorporated. During the field observations in Banikoara, seven interviews were conducted with individuals selected for their active involvement and knowledge of relevant issues. The interviews were *unstructured* and adapted to the local sociocultural context, as some participants might have expected compensation for their contribution—a common situation in field research of this nature.

Among the interviewees were:

- the president of the town's development association,
- the secretary of the Park's association of community actors,
- two local guides,
- the representative of the women's cooperative,
- an official from the regional delegation of the Ministry of Tourism, and
- a concessionaire of a regulated hunting area.

In addition, for the Social Network Analysis (SNA), 21 actors were identified as directly or indirectly influencing the territory, representing international, national, regional, and local organizations. These actors were selected collectively by all interviewees. Using UCINET 6.629, measures of centrality were calculated and the actor network was graphically represented to visualize interactions and influence patterns. The documentary analysis involved an exhaustive review of meeting minutes, resolutions, and management documents related to the W Transboundary Park. These materials were obtained from government archives and WAEMU repositories. The dataset also included technical reports, conservation strategies, international agreements, and documents from UNESCO advisory bodies detailing conservation status assessments and management decisions. Tripartite meetings proved to be particularly valuable for data collection. The resolutions and agreements adopted during these meetings were analysed to extract information on the policies and strategies implemented for the Park's management. Table 2 summarizes the main meetings held over the past five years, indicating their modality, objectives, participant profiles, and frequency.

Table 2: Meetings held between country bodies. 2020-2024

Year	Meeting	Place	Objective	Participants	Frequency
2020	Tripartite coordination meeting	Cotonou (Benin)	Coordination of transboundary management and conservation activities	Representatives of the Ministries of the Environment, Parks Managers	Annual
2021	Experience-sharing forum	Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso)	Exchange of good biodiversity management practices	Booking management experts, researchers, NGOs	Triennial
2022	Seminar on surveillance	Niamey (Niger)	Capacity Building in Ecological Monitoring	Park managers, local authorities	Biennial
2023	Steering Committee	W and Pendjari National Parks (Benin)	Monitoring the implementation of conservation and sustainable development projects	National governments, international organizations	Annual
2024	Consultative meeting	Tanguieta (Benin)	Consultation with stakeholders on new management initiatives	Local communities, researchers, regional authorities	Quarterly

The meetings analysed were diverse in both type and frequency, reflecting their specific objectives. They were designed to strengthen cross-border cooperation, coordinate sustainable management strategies, and ensure the protection of the Park's ecosystems. Among the most notable outcomes of these meetings were the signing of agreements and resolutions that

reaffirmed the commitment of the three countries to biodiversity conservation, the implementation of sustainable development strategies, and the promotion of regional integration.

In particular, meetings among the Member States of the W–Arly–Pendjari Biosphere Reserve have emphasized the need for integrated and collaborative management of the area's natural and cultural resources. These efforts seek to balance environmental conservation with the economic and social needs of local communities, ensuring that development initiatives remain inclusive and sustainable. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data obtained, triangulation was carried out across multiple sources, including documentary materials, field observations, and interviews with key stakeholders. This methodological strategy made it possible to cross-verify information and minimize potential biases, resulting in an accurate and comprehensive representation of the management and promotion dynamics of the W Park. The research faced certain limitations, such as restricted access to specific data within some governmental institutions and the limited availability of park managers during certain periods. However, these challenges were mitigated through the collaboration of international and regional organizations, as well as the continuous support of WAEMU, which facilitated access to relevant information and official documentation. Overall, the methodological approach adopted provides a comprehensive understanding of the Park's management and promotion strategies, highlighting their crucial role in advancing subregional integration and sustainable development in West Africa.

Results

Characterization of the management of the W Transboundary Park

The W Park was legally established by *General Decree No. 6009 SET* on 19 August 1954, transforming three wildlife reserves into a national park. Since the 1970s, the development of protected areas in the region has been reinforced through the first management plans for Pendjari National Park (1979) and the W Transboundary Biosphere Reserve (1989). These efforts were supported by international initiatives, notably the FAO project of 1989, which marked a turning point in the planning and management of the Biosphere Reserve. Over time, management has undergone several administrative phases, including the creation of the *Nature Protection and Hunting Inspectorate (IPNC)*, the *National Parks and Environmental Protection Project (PAPN)*, and the *Natural Resources Management Project (PGRN)*. These initiatives promoted co-management with local communities bordering the Pendjari and W Parks through environmental education and training programs, which progressively improved local perceptions of protected areas. However, the outcomes of the PGRN were largely limited to changes in community attitudes rather than substantial improvements in resource management practices. The W Transfrontier Park was recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996, and in 2002, it was incorporated into the W–Arly–Pendjari (WAP) Transboundary Complex, which today represents a cornerstone of biodiversity conservation in West Africa. Since June 2020, the Beninese section (covering over 8,000 km²) has been managed by African Parks, an international NGO specialized in the management of protected areas. The existence and management model of W Park provide a clear framework for regional integration, as the three States have progressively adopted joint management and promotion plans grounded in the conservation of shared biodiversity. Through decentralization and partnerships with private tour operators, local communities have assumed an increasingly active role in territorial management. This includes the creation of community committees responsible for ensuring rights of use, overseeing benefit-sharing mechanisms, and promoting a sustainable and inclusive model of conservation-based development.

Actors involved in the management and conservation of the W Transboundary Park

The management and conservation of the W Transboundary Park and its surrounding cross-border ecosystem rely on a diverse network of actors that collaborate to ensure biodiversity protection, sustainable development, and the promotion of ecotourism.

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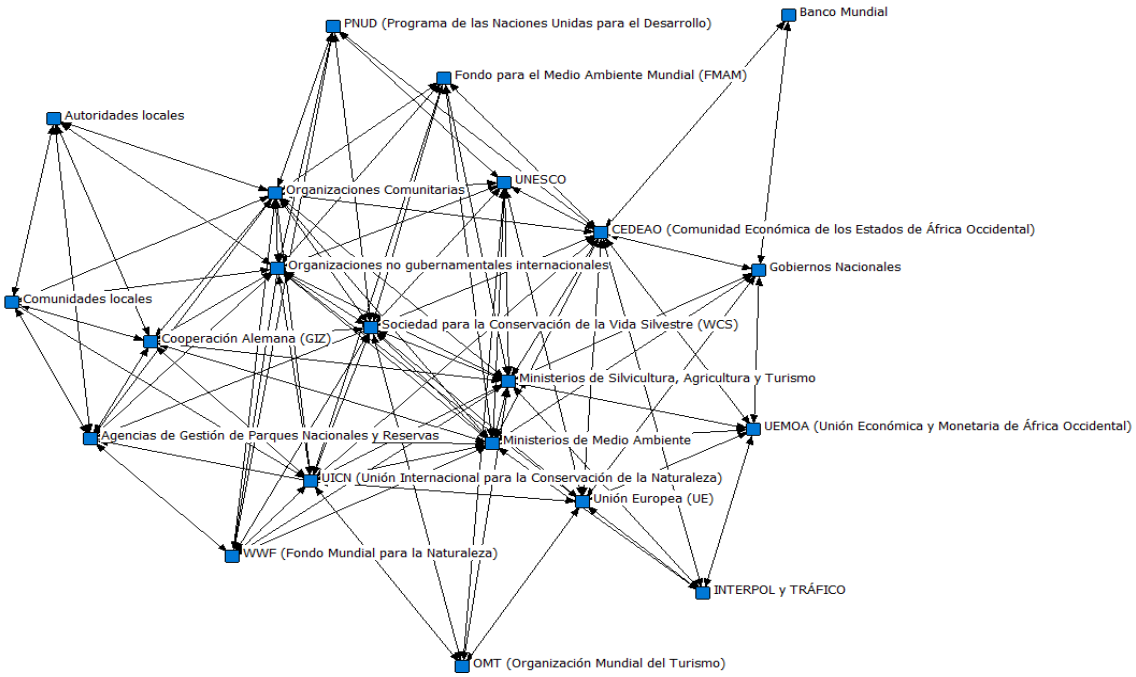

Figure 1: Network of actors operating in the Transfrontier Park W

These actors include government institutions, local communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international and regional bodies, each contributing from its specific field of action to the planning, implementation, and monitoring of strategies designed to balance natural resource conservation with socioeconomic development. The collaboration among these stakeholders is fundamental to addressing the environmental, social, and economic challenges facing the Biosphere Reserve, ensuring that conservation objectives are aligned with the well-being and participation of local populations (Figure 1). The governments of Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger are primarily responsible for establishing legislation, implementing national policies related to protected area management, and ensuring overall coordination. Management agencies, such as the *National Agency for the Management of Parks and Reserves of Benin (ANGPR)*, oversee the day-to-day administration of the Park and maintain close collaboration with local authorities and communities. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play an essential role in research, environmental education, awareness-raising, and the implementation of conservation projects. International institutions such as the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), UNESCO, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) provide crucial technical, financial, and scientific support. In addition, financial and development partners, including the World Bank, the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and bilateral donors such as the European Union (EU) and German Cooperation (GIZ), contribute to the financing of conservation initiatives and the implementation of sustainable development projects within the reserve. Regional organizations, notably the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), serve as key facilitators of cross-border coordination and support the implementation of transboundary projects. Table 3 presents the results of the network centrality analysis. Ministries and international organizations — particularly the Ministries of Environment and Forestry, ECOWAS, EU, and WWF — exhibit high values across all centrality metrics, confirming their strategic roles in park governance. ECOWAS emerges as the principal intermediary actor, facilitating communication and collaboration among the diverse stakeholders. At the same time, community-based organizations display high network reach, underscoring their potential to strengthen participatory governance. Finally, financial institutions such as the World Bank occupy proximal network positions, enabling rapid access to resources and funding mechanisms essential for effective management.

Table 3: Measures of centrality of the actors of the W Cross-Border Park

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Centrality Measures

	1 OutDeg	2 Indeg	3 Out2local	4 In2local	5 Out2Step	6 In2Step	7 OutARD	8 InARD	9 OutClose	10 InClose	11 Between	12 2StepBet
1 Gobiernos Nacionales	6.000	6.000	58.000	58.000	18.000	18.000	12.667	12.667	36.000	36.000	7.148	4.472
2 Ministerios de Medio Ambi	14.000	14.000	137.000	138.000	20.000	20.000	17.000	17.000	26.000	26.000	36.759	28.934
3 Ministerios de Silvicultu	14.000	14.000	135.000	134.000	20.000	20.000	17.000	17.000	26.000	26.000	33.967	27.158
4 Agencias de Gestión de Pa	7.000	9.000	69.000	93.000	18.000	19.000	13.167	14.333	35.000	32.000	5.502	3.986
5 Autoridades locales	5.000	5.000	50.000	50.000	15.000	15.000	11.667	11.667	40.000	40.000	0.000	0.000
6 Comunidades locales	6.000	5.000	61.000	50.000	16.000	15.000	12.333	11.667	38.000	40.000	0.544	0.417
7 Organizaciones no guberna	14.000	13.000	133.000	126.000	19.000	19.000	16.833	16.333	27.000	28.000	29.632	24.591
8 WWF (Fondo Mundial para l	7.000	8.000	81.000	95.000	19.000	19.000	13.333	13.833	34.000	33.000	2.510	2.360
9 UICN (Unión Internacional	12.000	12.000	127.000	124.000	20.000	20.000	16.000	16.000	28.000	28.000	17.280	13.490
10 Sociedad para la Conserva	14.000	13.000	140.000	133.000	20.000	20.000	17.000	16.500	26.000	27.000	18.030	15.790
11 UNESCO	9.000	9.000	103.000	101.000	20.000	20.000	14.500	14.500	31.000	31.000	6.103	5.061
12 PNUD (Programa de las Nac	6.000	6.000	71.000	70.000	20.000	20.000	13.000	13.000	34.000	34.000	1.482	1.065
13 Banco Mundial	2.000	2.000	19.000	19.000	13.000	13.000	9.833	9.833	45.000	45.000	0.000	0.000
14 Fondo para el Medio Ambie	7.000	7.000	95.000	93.000	20.000	20.000	13.500	13.500	33.000	33.000	0.389	0.222
15 Unión Europea (UE)	9.000	9.000	84.000	82.000	20.000	20.000	14.500	14.500	31.000	31.000	13.808	11.172
16 Cooperación Alemana (GIZ)	9.000	9.000	100.000	99.000	19.000	19.000	14.333	14.333	32.000	32.000	8.014	4.743
17 INTERPOL y TRÁFICO	5.000	5.000	56.000	56.000	18.000	18.000	12.167	12.167	37.000	37.000	0.472	0.472
18 OMT (Organización Mundial	5.000	5.000	58.000	57.000	17.000	17.000	12.000	12.000	38.000	38.000	0.472	0.472
19 Organizaciones Comunitari	14.000	14.000	137.000	137.000	20.000	20.000	17.000	17.000	26.000	26.000	33.308	23.801
20 CEDEAO (Comunidad Económi	13.000	13.000	118.000	117.000	20.000	20.000	16.500	16.500	27.000	27.000	49.708	36.922
21 UEMOA (Unión Económica y	6.000	6.000	61.000	61.000	18.000	18.000	12.667	12.667	36.000	36.000	0.872	0.872

Local authorities and communities occupy a secondary position in terms of network centrality, yet they possess attributes that make them highly relevant to the management of the W Transboundary Park. While these actors are essential for local governance, they do not play a centralizing role within the network. Their effectiveness largely depends on cooperation with national and international organizations. Interviews revealed a strong determination among local actors to preserve the Park, which they regard as an integral part of their lives. The inhabitants—born, raised, and living within this environment—hold valuable traditional knowledge and maintain an intimate connection with the ecosystem. This relationship positions them as key contributors to the effective management of natural resources. However, some community members expressed discontent over limited consultation in decision-making processes that directly affect their livelihoods. Specific concerns were raised regarding restrictions on access to certain park areas—measures intended for conservation but perceived as disruptive to traditional subsistence activities. These tensions underscore the necessity of adopting participatory governance approaches that integrate local needs and knowledge into the design and implementation of conservation and tourism development strategies. A broad consensus emerged among interviewees on the need to harmonize management policies across borders. Respondents emphasized the importance of treating the W Park as a single ecological and territorial unit, transcending administrative boundaries that hinder effective management. As one participant noted, *"The animals do not know borders, and neither do the poachers."* Testimonies also revealed a shared recognition of the importance of intensifying efforts to align management plans among Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger, viewing this harmonization as the only sustainable path toward long-term conservation. Nevertheless, several participants lamented the lack of forums for cross-border exchanges between neighbouring communities, which could facilitate the sharing of good practices and mutual learning. In addition, some interviewees criticized restrictions on access to certain resources, such as the prohibition of harvesting plant species used as firewood. While acknowledging the conservation rationale behind these measures, they pointed out the absence of viable alternatives and inconsistencies in enforcement, noting that the same policies were not always applied uniformly across the three countries.

Evolution and effectiveness of the W Transboundary Park tripartite agreements

The tripartite meetings of the W Park have produced a series of agreements addressing key aspects of management and conservation. As summarized in Table 4, these agreements focus on transboundary coordination, biodiversity monitoring, ecosystem protection, sustainable development, scientific research, ecotourism, community participation, and the fight against poaching.

Table 4: Agreements concluded from 2017 to 2024 outside the meetings held

Year	Agreements	Main objectives	Signatory parties	Domain
2015	Cross-border management agreement	Establishing unified and coordinated management of transboundary ecosystems	Ministries of Environment of Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger	Biodiversity conservation
2017	Supervisory Cooperation Agreement	Creating a shared system for monitoring animal populations and biodiversity	Ministries responsible for National Parks (Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger)	Ecological monitoring
2018	Agreement on the Management of Buffer Zones	Defining buffer zones to prevent human encroachment and protect wildlife corridors	Governments of the three countries, fleet managers	Ecosystem protection
2020	Agreement for the financing of sustainable development projects	Establishment of financial mechanisms to support local sustainable development projects	Governments, non-governmental organizations, donors	Sustainable development
2021	Collaboration agreement in scientific research	Promotion of scientific cooperation for research in ecology and biodiversity	Universities, research institutes, international agencies	Research and development
2022	Ecotourism Management Agreement	Promotion of ecotourism as a lever for sustainable development and preservation of ecosystems	Ministries of Tourism and Environment (Benin, Burkina Faso, Niger)	Ecotourism and local development
2023	Agreement for participatory management	Integration of local communities in management and conservation processes	Local communities, park managers, government authorities	Participatory governance
2024	Agreement on combating poaching	Strengthening the fight against poaching and wildlife trafficking	Governments of the three countries, security forces, NGOs	Combating poaching

The first tripartite agreements (2015–2018) focused primarily on the conservation and management of ecosystems, covering cross-border coordination, ecological monitoring, and the definition of buffer zones. These early initiatives reflected an initial commitment to the protection and sustainable management of shared natural resources among the participating countries. From 2020 onwards, the thematic scope of these agreements broadened considerably, encompassing sustainable development, scientific research, ecotourism, and participatory governance. This diversification evidences a shift toward balancing environmental conservation with economic and social objectives. By 2024, attention turned to pressing challenges such as poaching, illustrating the dynamic and adaptive nature of the Park's management framework in response to emerging regional issues. Looking ahead, climate change adaptation has become a priority, with the implementation of measures to mitigate its impacts on ecosystems. Digitalization will also play a transformative role through the integration of technologies such as drones and artificial intelligence for environmental monitoring. In parallel, environmental education remains a cornerstone, focusing on awareness-raising and capacity building among local communities. These agreements align closely with the UNESCO World Heritage conservation reports for the W-Arly-Pendjari Complex, which highlight significant progress in recent years. The 2022 report emphasized buffer zone delimitation, multinational collaboration, and financial and technical support to address recommendations from the World Heritage Committee. In 2024, conservation efforts intensified in the areas of security and anti-poaching, including joint patrols and the deployment of advanced technologies for wildlife monitoring, as well as the creation of dedicated funds for climate change adaptation and cross-border cooperation. The 2025 report further underscores progress in territorial control and the adoption of a roadmap for integrated transboundary management, although challenges persist—such as the cancellation of species translocation projects.

Management and promotion strategies of the W Transboundary Park

Cross-border collaboration is fundamental to ensuring the harmonized management of the W Transboundary Park and its adjoining reserves. Through a joint management committee, shared regulations are adopted, harmonizing national policies and developing integrated strategies that promote both ecosystem conservation and sustainable tourism. Tourism is conceived as a lever for subregional cooperation, contributing to improved living conditions for local communities, economic diversification, and environmental conservation. The Park's management and promotion are guided by the W National Park Management Plan, which harmonizes conservation policies and fosters cooperation among the three member countries. The plan is structured around five key pillars:

1. Conservation: Protection of ecosystems and biodiversity, including emblematic species such as elephants, lions, and antelopes. Actions target poaching control, deforestation prevention, and mitigation of climate change impacts.
2. Sustainable Development: Promotion of ecotourism and the implementation of sustainable practices that safeguard natural resources.
3. Promotion and Awareness: Development of campaigns to raise awareness at local, national, and international levels, emphasizing environmental education in surrounding communities.
4. Natural Resource Management: Adoption of sustainable approaches to the management of water, land, and wildlife, ensuring a balance between community needs and biodiversity protection.
5. International and Regional Cooperation: Coordination with international organizations (e.g., UNESCO, UNDP) and regional institutions to ensure the coherent implementation of management strategies.

Tourism management and promotion rely on five strategic axes designed to balance environmental conservation with socioeconomic development and regional integration:

- Strengthening regional infrastructure: Developing transport corridors that connect key tourist sites, alongside the construction of ecotourism routes, eco-camps, and observation points to enhance visitor experience and promote regional mobility.
- Developing integrated tourism circuits: Linking the W, Arly, and Pendjari reserves through ecotourism circuits combining wildlife safaris, cultural visits to surrounding villages, and adventure tourism (hiking, birdwatching), consolidating the area as a competitive and attractive destination.
- Training local communities: Building local capacity in sustainable tourism management by training guides, hospitality professionals, and entrepreneurs, while fostering awareness of conservation's socioeconomic benefits.
- International promotion: Strengthening visibility through participation in international tourism fairs (e.g., ITB Berlin, African Tourism Fair) and by creating a unified brand identity that highlights the biodiversity and cultural richness of the W-Arly-Pendjari complex.
- Fostering cross-border partnerships: Encouraging cooperation among government agencies, NGOs, local authorities, and tourism enterprises to promote joint investment, infrastructure development, and knowledge exchange. Establishing cross-border tourism management committees facilitates the harmonization of standards and environmental practices.

Finally, the introduction of sustainable tourism certification schemes—covering eco-friendly accommodations, responsible tourism activities, and locally produced goods—reinforces the Park's identity as a model of responsible and community-based tourism. These combined strategies not only position the W Transboundary Park as a benchmark for sustainable tourism in Africa but also contribute to regional cohesion and the empowerment of local communities. Economic incentives remain essential: revenues from tourism (taxes, fees, and royalties) must be equitably redistributed to enhance local living conditions

and sustain community engagement in conservation. Funds derived from ecotourism finance activities such as species monitoring, anti-poaching operations, and habitat restoration, ensuring that the W Park continues to serve as a vital refuge for Africa's flora and fauna.

Table 5: Types of incentives and financing for local communities in National Park W

Modality	Description	Type of Incentive/Funding	Results
Fund for Community Ecotourism	The Park supports local communities through a fund to finance ecotourism projects	**Direct Grants:** Funding for the construction of accommodations, roads, and ecotourism training	Increasing the income of communities through sustainable ecotourism, local employment and environmental preservation
Sustainable agriculture projects	Agricultural initiatives that do not affect biodiversity, such as agroforestry, are supported	**Microcredits:** Financing for the adoption of sustainable agricultural techniques and organic production	Improving farm incomes and strengthening food security.
3 Systemic Payment for Services Program	Communities are paid to protect the ecosystem and prevent illegal logging or poaching	**Direct payments:** Remuneration to communities for the sustainable management of natural resources	Incentivizing the protection of biodiversity, reducing illegal activities and improving environmental sustainability
Training in ecotourism and environmental management	Training programmes to enhance the capacities of communities in ecotourism and natural resource management	**Educational incentives:** Training courses, workshops and professional internships in tourism, guiding, and conservation	Greater participation of communities in tourism activities, generating employment and awareness of conservation practices
Development of artisanal products	The Park supports local communities to create and sell artisanal products	**Consulting and commercialization:** Support for the creation of local and international markets	Generating income for local families and promoting local culture among tourists.
Poaching Control Initiatives	Incentives for local communities to participate in poaching surveillance and control activities	**Compensation:** Remuneration for community patrols involved in poaching monitoring and control	Reducing Illegal Hunting, Empowering Communities, and Protecting Endangered Species
Community Infrastructure	Local communities manage infrastructure	**Investment in infrastructure:** Financing for the construction and management of visitor centers, ecolodges, and tourist routes	Economic development through ecotourism and improvement of infrastructure within the Park
Community renewable energy projects	Renewable energy initiatives are financed in the communities near the Park	**Green financing:** Credits and subsidies for the implementation of renewable energies (solar panels or wind systems)	Reducing dependence on fossil fuels, promoting sustainability and improving quality of life

This analysis shows that the W Park is positioned not only as a model of environmental conservation but also as a driver of sustainable community development. Its comprehensive approach combines economic, social, and ecological strategies that generate tangible benefits for both local communities and biodiversity.

Discussion and conclusions

This study aimed to address two main questions: How does the W Transboundary Park contribute to subregional integration in West Africa? and how do the tourism management and promotion strategies implement balance environmental conservation with socioeconomic development? The findings reveal that the W Park acts as a catalyst for regional integration through the adoption of shared conservation policies and the establishment of mechanisms for tourism promotion. The tripartite commissions have created spaces for ongoing cooperation, enabling the joint management of common challenges. However, the effectiveness of the implementation of adopted resolutions still requires systematic evaluation. The Park has also fostered ecotourism initiatives that enhance local community income, support biodiversity conservation, and strengthen cross-border collaboration. These outcomes underscore the importance of adopting a subregional approach rather than pursuing isolated national strategies. Coherent and coordinated tourism management, conservation, and promotion at a supranational level are therefore essential. These results align with previous research emphasizing the role of Transboundary Protected Areas (TPAs) in promoting regional integration and environmental sustainability (Swatuk, 2021). Similarly, recent studies in West Africa (Bauer et al., 2021; Sogbohossou, 2023) have highlighted the need for integrated management strategies for shared ecosystems, particularly in contexts of increasing pressure on natural resources. This study extends those contributions by providing empirical evidence of how initiatives within the W Park have successfully integrated conservation goals with community development strategies.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study enriches the concept of integrated management of transboundary protected areas by demonstrating that shared governance can serve as a catalyst for regional cohesion. Regarding subregional integration, the implementation of common policies fosters sustainable development while reinforcing diplomatic ties among Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger. This paper also contributes to the literature on ecotourism as a tool for regional integration, highlighting the role of protected areas in the development of transnational tourism circuits that generate shared economic benefits and reinforce a sense of regional identity. These findings align with the conceptual framework of the African Union's Agenda 2063, and with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which emphasize interregional cooperation and environmental stewardship. Overall, this study reaffirms the importance of the W Transboundary Park as an exemplary model of subregional integration and sustainable development in West Africa. Through joint strategies in conservation, ecotourism, and regional promotion, it achieves a dual objective: protecting ecosystems while fostering cross-border cooperation. This model may serve as a reference for other protected areas in Africa and beyond, demonstrating how natural spaces can become engines of integration, development, and sustainability—strengthening community resilience and enhancing regional governance structures.

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